Final Ride

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Final Ride

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FINAL RIDE

By: Amanda (HellersWebDoc@yahoo.com)

Sequel to 'Fast Ride'

October 1999

Part 1

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Julia shot up from her bed; the sheet clung to her body that was
covered with a sheen of perspiration. Fumbling, she searched for the
light switch. The bright light of the Luma lamp drove away the dark
night that suddenly pressed down on her like an oppressive blanket.
It had been ages since she dreamt of Alonzo. Now, for the third night
in a row, he was back, haunting her dreams again. And this time, it
had seemed so real! She took a few deep breaths, trying to calm her
heart that was beating wildly.

She padded on bare feet to the window; she knew she wouldn't be able
to sleep another moment this night. With relief Julia noticed the
soft, pink glow on the horizon, announcing the approach of another
day. She would just start her workday a little early today, she
decided.

She stood a few moments more, staring out at the New Pacifica Square
below her window, most of it still hidden in the shadows of the

night. Two decades had gone by since the colony was founded. And even more time had passed since Alonzo died. Julia sighed. No matter how much time had passed, it still hurt to think of him.

A light knock on her door drew her from her reflections and, somewhat startled, she turned away from the window.

"Everything okay, Julia? I saw your light on," a low voice rumbled behind the door and she breathed a little easier.

"Yes, John, I'm fine," Julia said and opened the door for Danziger. "I just had a dream."

"You sure you okay?" Danziger asked, as he squinted at her, his eyes adjusting to the bright light in her room. Concern still sounded in his voice. "You look a little pale."

She smiled at him briefly, a quick smile that nevertheless softened her features. "I'll be fine. I dreamt about Alonzo."

"Oh," Danziger nodded. It was all she needed to say; he knew what a devastating blow it had been for her to lose Alonzo. Julia had never been able to leave it completely behind her; instead she hid her grief behind a cold professionalism. The colonists called her a cold-hearted bitch; the small group of people that had trekked with her across the planet knew better.

"Have you heard anything of Devon?" Julia changed the subject. Danziger shook his head in denial; old pain flashed across his face before he masked it.

"Not since Uly was killed," he replied. "I'm worried about her. They never trusted her, even after she mended her differences with Uly. I don't know what they'll do without him."

"She'll be fine," Julia assured him. "Devon's a smart woman, she can hold her own." Julia missed her friend though. Had missed her ever since Devon joined her son, who led his band of rebels in the Terrian resistance against the human government. Aside from Bess Martin, Devon was the only woman on the planet Julia would call her friend. And Bess, no matter how well intentioned, was more concerned with the welfare of her extensive flock of kids than she was with human-Terrian relations or politics.

Julia couldn't fault Devon for leaving New Pacifica. When the government had nearly killed Uly, attempting to remove his Terrian DNA, Devon gave up trying to work *with* the New Pacifican government. Despite her endless attempts at mediation, the Terrians lost more and more ground to the human settlers. Currently, the two species were in the middle of another argument over the water rights to the Lower Morgan River.

"I better go," Danziger said after long pause. "The Board of Administration ordered the large Transport charged and ready to go by sunrise. God only knows why." He rolled his eyes in exaggerated confusion and Julia couldn't help laughing.

"Yeah," she grinned, "who knows what they're up to now. Thanks for checking in."

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Julia decided to skip breakfast. She didn't feel very hungry and was still shaken from the unexpected appearance of Alonzo in her dreams. The first few years after his death she'd dreamt often about him but as the years passed he gradually faded toward the back of her mind. She hardly ever thought of him these days. And when she did, she usually pushed the thoughts away, back into the dark crevices of her mind. Julia still felt she had somehow failed him, when it turned out she couldn't find a cure for the Cryo Degeneracy Syndrome that eventually killed him.

The hospital was quiet when she entered. A wooden, two-story building, it was one of the oldest in the town. The Advance group had built it before the Colony ship arrived.

Julia passed the front desk, taking her schedule for the day from the sleepy nurse there and entered her office. The small, square room had been her refuge for years; she actually felt more at home here than in her living quarters. She spent more time in her office than anywhere else -- barring the lab, maybe. Dedicated to her work, Julia had been instrumental in finding the synthesized inhalant that arrested the progression of the Syndrome. It didn't cure them but at least allowed those Syndrome children that the Terrians didn't heal to live moderately normal lives.

She checked her patient schedule for the day. She heaved a deep sigh as she saw the first name on the list. Max Taggert. Just the kind of patient she wanted to see today, Julia thought glumly. Never a likeable character, the government official had become insufferable since Ulysses Adair was killed in a sabotage raid on a mining probe.

Julia glanced at the numbers on the digital chronometer that was built into the surface of the desk. Relieved she noted she still had a couple of hours before Taggert was scheduled to appear for his monthly check-up. She decided to spend the time working on one of her personal research projects.

When she rummaged through her personal files, thrown in a careless heap in one of the desk drawers, her fingers came across a VR module hidden in a corner. Her heart skipped a beat as she slowly drew back her hand. Julia knew immediately what the module contained; she didn't have to check the recording's index.

It was Alonzo's goodbye message. She hadn't watched in a long time. Actually, she'd all but forgotten about the module being in her desk. For long moments she stared at the small cylinder, twirling it between her fingers. Then she grabbed her Gear set and, taking a deep breath, plugged in the module...

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The sound of the door banging open broke in on Alonzo's recorded voice, repeating his good-byes in her ears. Shaking slightly, she pulled the Gear from her head. With a start Julia noted the chronometer's display; she'd been playing and replaying the short goodbye for more than an hour. Quickly blinking to disperse the few tears that had formed in her eyes she looked up to see who had entered unannounced.

"You're too early. And didn't I tell you to wait *outside*, last time?" she asked, barely contained anger lining her voice.

"Yeah, well, I have a busy day ahead," the man that just entered, Max Taggert, said with a dismissive shrug. He took a whiff of the inhaler. "So if you could just hurry up your examination and adjust my medication, we can all continue with our... work," he replied, throwing a meaningful glance at the Gear set on her desk and managing to make the word sound contemptuous.

Julia didn't reply, instead she grabbed for her trusted Diaglove, old and battered but well cared for. She motioned for Taggert to sit in the chair in front of her desk and began to take readings. He fidgeted impatiently on the chair as she took her time.

"Can't you hurry up, Doctor?" he finally snapped. "I don't wanna be late."

"Hmm?" she replied absently, peering at the readings on the glove. "What's so important?"

"Eh -- nothing I can talk about," he replied, evading a direct answer. "You'll find out tomorrow."

Julia shrugged. Taggert always was up to some scheme or other. "Everything checks out fine," she said, finishing her glove-scan. "We don't even need to adjust your medication. I was going to take a full physical today, but since you seem set upon getting this examination over with as soon as possible... I guess we can do that next time."

Taggert jumped from the chair. He took another deep breath from the inhaler and hurried out of her office. In the door, he called over his shoulder, "Tomorrow, Doctor, everything will be different. And New Pacifica will finally be ours."

She stared at the door closing behind him. What was he talking about? New Pacifica will finally be ours?

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Suddenly Julia became aware that something was different about her surroundings. The office walls, the shelves lining it, the chair in front of her desk seemed to shimmer and fade to a pale gray. She blinked and everything was solid again. Julia shook her head, wondering if the broken nights, disturbed by dreams had tired her more than she thought.

She glanced again at the far wall. And as before, it rippled, giving the appearance that she was looking at it through a sheen of water. And through the shimmer, a figure emerged. Vague at first, she immediately recognized him, looking just as she remembered. "Alonzo?" she whispered, not really believing what her eyes told her.

As soon as she spoke his name, the figure solidified. The air around him rippled and swirled in a widening circle, obscuring the objects behind him. From the corners of her eye, Julia noted with a start that the rest of her office seemed to be as solid as ever.

"What's happening?" she said out loud.

Alonzo smiled as he replied. "Doc, you are looking into the
Dreamplane," he said. "I -- we," he amended, motioning beside him
where two Terrians appeared out of nowhere, "we can't pull you onto
the plane. The Terrians are few and cannot spare the energy it would
take. Besides, I knew you wouldn't appreciate it much." He grinned at
her disarmingly. Then his face turned serious. "We've come to ask for
your help."

"Why would I want to help the Terrians," she asked, a note of
hostility in her voice. "They took you away from me."

"That's not true, Julia. You know it's not. I was going to die. And
nothing you could do would've saved me."

She knew he was telling the truth, still, it hurt to admit her
failure. Julia sighed. "I know. It's just been... so hard, without
you."

"I'm sorry," he said, glancing away guiltily. "I did try to talk to
you in your dreams, before. But you pushed me away and I thought it
was better this way."

For long minutes she stared at his apparition. Then she came to a
decision. "Okay, what would you like me to do?"

"A series of Geolocks set along the Lower Morgan River has frozen the
Terrians' homes. We need someone who can gain access to the codes.
Who can use the codes to unlock the land -- and release the Terrians
that are caught in the petrifaction."

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Part 2

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"Did you find it yet? Did you find the file?" Julia asked
impatiently. Morgan hunched over the keyboard, quickly typing in
commands. They were in the darkened office that belonged to Taggert,
in the Government Hall of New Pacifica. In front of Morgan, the
built-in desk-screen glowed softly. Several holographics decorating
the wall behind him scintillated in the glow.

Outside the room, the hallway was quiet. It was late in the evening,
the offices deserted. Julia and Morgan had sneaked into the building
after the cleaning crew finished their work.

"No, not yet, but I'll find it," Morgan grumbled without taking his
eyes from the screen. "Just give me a minute." As he hit another
sequence of keys, long lines of computer language began to scroll
across the screen.

Julia wandered around the room, fidgeting. She fervently wished
Morgan would hurry. She looked closer at the holographics, squinting
to make out the pictures in the meager light. Most of them showed
Taggert, posing with Terrians or Grendlers. Julia gritted her teeth.
The hypocritical worm! Concluding treaties with the various native
species, while at the same time plotting to petrify their

habitat.

When Alonzo and the Terrians had asked for her help, Julia had gone
to see Morgan. With his history, she hoped he would be willing to
help when she told him about the petrified Terrians. He was also the
only one she could trust that would be able to crack the Government's
security systems and find the release codes for the Geolocks.

She didn't tell him about Alonzo's appearance. He wouldn't have
believed her; she could hardly admit to herself that it actually
happened. Just as she hoped, Morgan said he wanted to help. But he
had balked at "breaking into the Government Hall and stealing the
codes," as he put it. Bess interfered. "You don't want to try and
release the Geolocks manually, again, do you?" she had asked and
reluctantly Morgan had given in. And now he was hacking into
Taggert's account in the central computer, trying to find the file
that contained the codes.

"Why would Taggert and his buddies lock all this land along the river
in the first place?" he wondered out loud while tapping away.

"To stop the Terrians from interfering in whatever they're planning,
would be my guess," Julia answered. She glanced at the door, hoping
no meticulous government official would decide to work late tonight.
"This morning during his physical, he mentioned something important
was going to happen. When I asked what, he clammed up real
quickly."

"Oh my God," Morgan suddenly gasped. He stared at the display in
front of him, a perplexed frown on his face. Julia hurried over to
take a look at the screen.

"What is it?" she asked. "Can't you find the codes?"

"No..." Morgan said, drawing out the word. "It's worse. Look at this,
Julia, at what they're planning."

She stared at the display, the lines and scribbles not making much
sense to her. It was a map, she could tell that much. And she
recognized the area, the Lower Morgan River. She didn't recognize the
lake in the middle of the map though.

"What?" she asked him, not understanding. "Where is this? What's that
lake?"

"This is what they're planning," Morgan said. "You know how the Lower
Morgan River runs through that narrow gorge? They are going to block
the gorge and create a lake in the valley. It'll give New Pacifica
access to all the water we could need."

"Can they do that overnight?" she asked, incredulously.

"Oh yeah," Morgan said bitterly. "All they need to do is chuck in a
couple of boulders, plug the holes with grout. It'll dry out
overnight. And when we wake up tomorrow, we got ourselves the
beginnings of a nice lake."

"But what about the Terrians?" Julia said. Then it hit her and she
paled. "Oh God, they're going to drown them! Taggert couldn't care
less; they're desperate to get access to the water. Morgan, we got to

stop them!"

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"Morgan, look!" Julia pointed at the hills ahead. Overhead, the
fading light of the twin moons was partly obscured by clouds racing
across the expanse. It created a weird shadow play across the
terrain, making navigation a treacherous undertaking. Once they found
the unlock codes, Morgan and Julia had taken an ATV and left the
village quietly. They knew they couldn't wait for daylight to release
the Geolocks. Julia just hoped they'd be in time to unfreeze the
earth and allow the Terrians to get away. She urged Morgan to push
the small vehicle to its limits.

The sky colored a soft pink by the time they neared the foot of the
hills and the Lower Morgan River. The River entered the New Pacifica
delta from the highlands through a narrow gully, before emptying
itself into the Sea of Antius. That narrow passageway was now blocked
with a wall of rock; patches of damp concrete still showed near the
top. Julia and Morgan climbed off the ATV and walked to the wall.
"They've sealed off the valley."

"We've to hurry," Morgan said and began to climb up the hillside
close to the wall of smoothed rock. Julia quickly followed and in
silence they clambered up the hill. With the River's passage blocked,
it was the only entrance to the petrified valley among the
hills.

When they finally crossed the hill and reached the valley floor,
Julia noticed that a large pool had already formed at the foot of the
wall that blocked the River's course. "Good thing it hasn't rained
much lately," she muttered. "Or the water would've been much higher
already." Morgan only nodded in reply and hurried along the bed of
the swelling river, Julia following on his heels.

"Morgan, wait," Julia called when she spotted the glint of metal
above them, on the hillside. "There's one of 'em right there." But
Morgan shook his head.

"We must release the Geolocks in order," he said. "We've got to start
at the one furthest away, that they set first. One mistake will
trigger the other Locks to change their codes. They've put in an
self-executing safety system." He turned and trudged on through the
undergrowth.

They found the first of the series of Geolocks two kilometers further
into the valley, half-hidden beneath a green-leafed scrub. Morgan
hesitated. "Are you sure this is the first one?" he asked. "We've
only gone three kilometers. I thought it would be further
away."

"They'd want the petrifaction spheres to overlap," Julia explained
and pointed at the number on the side of the Geolock. It corresponded
with the number Morgan had written on his keypad.

He realized that what she said made sense; if the frozen circles of
land just touched at the edges, it'd leave parts of the riverbed and
the intended lake accessible to the Terrians. He quickly opened the
lid of the Geolock and punched in the first of the release codes. As
the computerized voice confirmed the code, he commanded it to unlock

the entire area within its range, and to do it three seconds from now.

They didn't wait for the device to finish; instead the two hurried back through the brush to the next Geolock. Again Morgan entered the code and the machine accepted. The squishy sounds of the reversal process filled the air, when suddenly a loud rumble in the distance shook the earth.

"Oh hell," Morgan muttered. "They probably blew up some hill to divert the stream of the Upper Morgan River." Julia glanced at him sideways, biting her lower lip.

"If that's true, then we don't have much time left," she said. "Soon this valley will be flooded with water. You know how large the Upper Morgan River is."

Running now, they made their way to the third Lock and ordered it to release. The Lower Morgan River was fast overflowing its banks, being fed with the water from the Higher branch. Julia and Morgan were wading knee-deep in water that was rising visibly and were forced to climb to higher ground. The first rays of the sun were edging over the top of the hills, reflecting on the lid of the last of the Geolocks.

The last Lock was situated a few hundred meters from the man-made blockade of stone that sealed off the valley. At the base of the wall, the water churned wildly, the fast-moving stream suddenly finding its way blocked. The Lock, placed halfway between the summit and what was once the riverbed, was already half submerged, surrounded by white-foamed water. It was also set in the opposite hill.

> Julia began to wade to it, and as the water's full force hit her, she stumbled and fell. Gasping for air she was pulled back on her feet, Morgan tugging on her arm. <p>

"It's too late," he said. "We can't reach it in time. The water is too high already, too wild, we can't get across the River."

"No!" Julia gasped. "We have to try. The Terrians will drown if we don't unlock this last section too. There's still time!" When Morgan hesitated, she grabbed him by the shoulders. "Morgan, give me the codes. I'll do it. You get out of here!"

> "Julia, you'll drown!" he said, desperately trying to stop her.<p>

"Morgan! The code!" she demanded and reluctantly he gave it to her. Julia only hesitated a moment, then smiled up at him wanly.

"Go back to your family, Morgan," she told him. "Before they catch you. You've done enough-- " Julia turned and plunged forward into the water, fighting to keep her head above the surface and make her way to the Lock that was now fully submerged, its red display a blur below the whiteness of the foam.

Taking a deep breath, she dove and quickly punched in the code. She

couldn't voice-command the machine which area to unlock and when to do it, but she hoped the default settings would be enough to do it and do it soon.

She tried to get back to the surface, but the River pulled at her, dragging her down. She was getting desperate for air, her lungs burning to breathe. The force of the water was too strong. Suddenly she heard a voice in her head.

"I'll be waiting, Julia." The roar of the water in her ears faded, the cold wetness on her skin was no longer a nuisance. The urge to breathe disappeared. Then she saw him. Alonzo, standing there, his arms stretched out toward her in welcome. And she went to him.

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file.